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THE 1970S : THE QUESTION OF THOREAU'S DECLINING REPUTATION by Michael Meyer
(This address was delivered in a somewhat longer version on December 29, 1979 at the Thoreau Society meeting held in conjunction with the Modern Language Association convention in San Francisco.)

I'm hoping that this brief and sketchy consideration of Henry Thoreau's contemporary reputation will generate some discussion among us, because I think it may well have something to do with our reading, teaching, and writing about him in the 1980s. I would like to begin by offering an objection to my announced topic. Some of you must be wondering how Thoreau's reputation can be perceived as declining given that all of us here tonight are attending a meeting devoted exclusively to him nearly one hundred and twenty years after his death. California is a long way from Concord (to be more exact, Thoreau once described it as "three thousand miles nearer to hell"), but it seems apparent that in both distance and in time he has survived quite well. Although some of his remains are reposing not too far away at the Huntington Library in San Marino, we are here primarily owing to his continued presence in American life and literature rather than his passing. And so before raising any questions about the possible decline of his reputation, I feel duty bound to acknowledge first his continued presence.

An enormous amount has been written about Thoreau during the past decade which attests to his popularity. One curious example of this can be found in the first printing of the new *Encyclopedia Britannica*, that sober and usually reliable repository of student term papers. The 1976 edition states that it took Thoreau five years to sell two million copies of *Walden*. The number of editors and proofreaders who let this get by probably comes close to the one million, nine hundred and ninety eight thousand copies they were off by. What may help to account for the error is that given Thoreau's contemporary reputation the number seemed reasonable. He has been ubiquitous during the decade, particularly during the first half. Wall posters, greeting cards, wrapping paper, calendars, hats, sweatshirts, patches, advertising, you name it, and Thoreau was right there because he was the right stuff. For a time even the Air Force featured quotations from his writings in their recruitment materials. He seemed to anticipate this commercialization when he wrote in "Walking" that



by Bill Bly

The Thoreau Society, Inc. is an informal gathering of students and followers of Henry David Thoreau. Rev. Dana McLean Greeley, Concord, Mass., president; Mrs. Charles MacPherson, Acton, Mass., vice-president; and Walter Harding, State University, Geneseo, N.Y. 14454, secretary-treasurer. Annual membership \$3.00; life membership, \$100.00. Address communications to the secretary.

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"Our winged thoughts are turned to poultry." May-be so, but he might have been more encouraged had he known that astronauts named one of the sites on the moon Walden. And he might have appreciated the irony in learning that Emerson's copy of *Walden* sold this past year for more than seventy two thousand dollars.

Of more lasting importance are the numerous books and articles that have been written about him during this decade. We now have individual book-length studies of his early life, his attitudes toward Indians, toward Nature, his imagination, his religious thought, his reputation abroad, and his political reputation at home. And this list is not exhaustive. The several hundred articles that have been written range from scholarly pieces to *PMLA* to simple appreciations in *Reader's Digest* - even the *Rosicrucian Digest*. Moreover, there is continued interest in him in a number of foreign countries.

If doctoral dissertations are, like publications, an index to a writer's popularity in the academy, the seventies are clearly the Thoreau decade. Approximately sixty dissertations were completed on Thoreau in the past ten years; that's nearly half of all the American dissertations ever written about him, and if those sixty dissertations were bound together they would be nearly twice the length of his published journals. A frightening prospect, by the way. Powerful generalizations about these books, articles, and dissertations are not easy to come by, because they vary so much in content, method, and quality. The topics read like a Whitman catalog, except that there are many more colons. The multiple points of view they represent should not be surprising, however, considering the nature of their subject. Thoreau did not, as he put it in *Walden*, con-

sider it "a ground for complaint if a man's writings admit of more than one interpretation," and many of us have diligently taken him at his word. His life and writings were designedly challenging and controversial, so it makes perfectly good sense that we continue to find him compelling. After all, what other major American writer can you think of whose very name is variously pronounced? But I want to get back to our being here tonight as a more immediate manifestation of his reputation.

This Thoreau Society meeting is one of a limited number of Associated Meetings listed in the *MLA* Program guide, a listing that places Thoreau in some good company with Dante, Milton, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Dickens, as well as with Hawthorne and Melville. Thoreau has the singular distinction

of being honored by the largest society of its kind devoted to an American author. Membership is well over a thousand. In fact, the Thoreau Society is the only organization that lists itself on the Program as "incorporated." Although Thoreau was disinclined to join any incorporated societies, they are inclined to join him. In addition to the Thoreau Society there are also, of course, the Thoreau Lyceum in Concord, and the Thoreau Fellowship in Orono, Maine, each with its own publication and substantial membership lists. These organizations have had a significant effect upon Thoreau's reputation, certainly more than that early Thoreau Club of 1891 which consisted of some local young women in a small eastern town who chirped these happy lines (quoted in TSB, 77):

Starlight, sunlight, all of them are ours,
 Hills, and valleys, dotted o'er with flowers;
 Beauty, for us her banner bright unfurls
 And Nature gives us
 All she has,
 For we are the "Thoreau Club" girls.

If, instead of dying of tuberculosis in 1862, Thoreau had lived to read these lines, he would surely have fallen victim to the fantods.

But perhaps the sentimental enthusiasm for nature expressed so badly by the Thoreau Club girls would have been less troubling for him than the more modern response represented by Bernard Malamud's remarkable Fanny Bick, an energetic, peripatetic character from a novel entitled Dubin's Lives, published this year. Fanny, aptly named, is a young uninhibited college drop-out of the 1970s who ends up having an intense and passionate affair with William Dubin, a writer in his late fifties living in upstate New York who achieves financial security in the 1960s by writing a successful biography of Henry Thoreau. (Any resemblance to any person, living or dead or in this room is purely coincidental.) Early in the novel Dubin explains to Fanny that Thoreau sublimated his passions but accomplished much and lived a satisfying life. Fanny, however, is not convinced: "I have my doubts about how happy he was." "It must be a pretty dry lay, banging nature," she says. Although Fanny's reservation is more direct than most of us ordinarily hear in our classrooms, her reaction, if not her manner of expression, is characteristic of a great number of contemporary responses to Thoreau. There are many who believe that his views on sexuality are as innocent and quaint as the Thoreau Club girls themselves. I mention this not to rehearse the familiar charges of priggishness leveled at Thoreau, but because Fanny's perspective represents a fundamental reaction that some people have when they read him. What's important about this is that sexuality has, in the recent past, become an insistent metaphor for one's own humanity; the two are often used synonymously. You'll recall that President Carter's Playboy confession of hearty lust was made in the context of his attempting to demonstrate that he was human as well as born again. Carter's statement was not the same as St. Augustine's plea that he be given "continence and chastity, but not yet." In the sixties readers were mostly willing to overlook what some have described as a lack of human warmth in Thoreau's attitudes and values, because they were so grateful for his quotable essay on civil disobedience and for Walden, a narrative about life in the woods that seemed to be a prescient counter-culture handbook of dissent which helped disperse the epigrammatic seeds necessary for

the greening of America's consciousness.

But in the seventies - at least after Nixon and the war - things have been different. We've run out of the frenetic energy that was everywhere abundant in the sixties. Dissent, what little there is that can be measured, is communicated in weekly polls over the phone rather than in street demonstrations. We have undergone, as one national magazine expressed it just last week, the cooling of America - and in more ways than one. Our clichés reveal the archetypes of the decade; political millennialism has given way to individual millennialism. We're laid back; we're into everything, but committed to little. Self-awareness and self-absorption have provided us with the energy for jogging as well as an appetite for Perrier. Although there is the slim possibility of a net gain in weighing less as the result of such a regimen, we most certainly are made better consumers by it in our willingness to pay more for what were once called sneakers, sweatclothes, and water. Health and personal happiness. The best things in life are free; and never before have they been so successfully retail-ed.

I'm not here, of course, to provide an updated version of Thoreau's chapter on "Economy." Recent social critics have amply lashed out at what has been described as this decade's narcissistic culture. I mention it only to remind you of some of the context in which Thoreau has been read recently. He is now much less identified with cause than he is with ascetic forms of self-development and self-culture. Despite his disclaimers that we must be careful to find and pursue our own way, this is probably as he intended it, but the self he offers as a potential identity for his readers is a self that bears only a superficial resemblance to that famous and wolfish "me generation." There is a distinction to be made between anxious self-scrutiny and critical self-examination. The former is the equivalent of looking into a mirror to confirm one's image of the self, while the latter involves genuine reflection and a willingness to change rather than a fear of change. The imagination behind the insistent declaration that "There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice" can hardly be described as mellow.

What I am getting at is that although Thoreau continues to serve as a prototype for our concerns about social conformity, the environment, and our suspicions of ever-more sophisticated forms of technology he, nevertheless, makes people feel uncomfortable. Whereas that discomfort was assuaged by Thoreau's apparent relevance to the politics and confrontations of the sixties, it seems to be very much in the forefront today. The complaint is that he is too uncompromising (a quality that was a public virtue in the sixties). His moral certainty and righteousness seem to leave little room for moral ambiguity and doubt. Several years ago, for example, Ramsey Clark, the unsuccessful candidate for the Democratic nomination for senator in New York State, was criticized for quoting Thoreau too often. We have once again, perhaps, rediscovered Hawthorne's "iron tissue of necessity." Definitive positions and actions seem less accessible to us. The idea that "The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right" carries little credibility in the seventies. We are deeply suspicious of those who polarize issues into right and wrong, who insist that they have driven truth into their corner and refuse to

compromise. At the moment, the most recent and dramatic embodiment of such absolutist principles is the Ayatollah Khomeini, who in an interview this fall proclaimed that "during my long lifetime, I have always been right about what I said." Let me quickly add that this is not to say that Thoreau is a Transcendental version of the Ayatollah, but it is to point out that, particularly among those who read Thoreau the first time, there seems to be a propensity to see an affinity between Thoreau and what Khomeini represents, while in the sixties the identification was with figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. At least that is what a small sampling of my colleagues report. Students have become wary of Thoreau.

It is too soon to judge with any degree of confidence whether or not these reservations about him have very much to do with what seems to be a relative decline in interest in him. Those dissertations I mentioned earlier are suggestive though. Of the sixty or so written during the 1970s, about two-thirds of them were completed by 1976. Obviously, most of the Ph.D. candidates who wrote them were undergraduates in the latter half of the 1960s. There are also fewer editions of *Walden* in print now than there were in the early seventies, and I have had some scattered reports by their editors that they are not selling nearly as well as they used to. Nor do Thoreau's essays appear as frequently in freshman composition readers. The high interest level that his work was thought to guarantee for a classroom discussion does not seem to be as marketable as it once was.

Some of this decline can perhaps be accounted for in ways that are independent of Thoreau. There were, no doubt, fewer graduate students enrolled in universities in the late 1970s, just as there were many fewer undergraduates taking English courses and buying editions of *Walden*, but it's more than that. Many of Thoreau's ideas about the environment, personal economy, and individual integrity are by now terribly familiar to our students and to the culture at large so that he doesn't have the popular appeal that he once commanded. History has caught up with his prophetic voice. For some the gadfly now sounds like a nag. After he was, in a sense, discovered in the sixties and celebrated through the early seventies, it is probably inevitable that he should begin to recede into the nineteenth century.

It is significant that Thoreau has a tendency to be especially contemporary for those who believe that they are familiar with him but who don't take the time to read him. So much of his popularity, particularly in the recent past, has been founded upon our needs rather than his writings and life. There has been a strong impulse to consume Thoreau - to use him - but little sustained effort to read him. This was made strikingly clear at the beginning of the seventies when Walter Harding wrote to Allen Ginsberg, who was himself appearing on wall posters, to ask if he had a special affinity for Thoreau. We can be grateful for Ginsberg's reply because it is strikingly representative. I have preserved the flavor of the letter's fortune cookie prose style, but I don't quote the entire letter (see TSB, 112):

Dear Mr. Harding

Thoreau set first classic US [sic] example of war resistance, back to nature, tax refusal. As at the moment I'm living in country without electric on commune using 19th century techne to move water

(hydrolic ram) & we're doing organic gardening, & I'm a member of the War Tax Refusal group. I find myself more & more indebted to Thoreau -- particularly for his manner & remarks on being in jail -- without, oddly, having very much read in his texts.

Perhaps the middle class version of this trend was the news last year that a Los Angeles company called Books on Tape is manufacturing cassettes for commuters to use in their automobile tape decks. One of the most popular rentals is *Walden* at \$7.50 for eight 1½ hour cassettes. Depending upon the traffic, that's about a week's worth of background noise to accompany all those nostalgic lives of quiet desperation. The catalog that lists the company's complete offerings features a quotation from Emerson which reads: "In the highest civilization the book is still the highest delight." And that, I'm afraid, says it all. So far as I know no pedestrians have reported hearing "Higher Laws" thundering from a 100-decibel over-the-shoulder stereo on the street..

Though the times are inauspicious for the kind of Romantic individualism Thoreau represents and for books in general, and for English courses in particular, there is no real immediate danger that Thoreau is about to sink into obscurity. There has been a decided devaluation of the inflated Thoreau of the sixties, but in the long run that was as inevitable as it is desirable. For a time we seemed to lose track of Thoreau as a human being and a writer in our eagerness to make him a spokesman for our own cherished causes. But some recent studies -- Sayre's and Lebeaux's to cite only two examples -- have revealed him in less than heroic proportions, but they are not debunking studies. And if we find ourselves coming to grips with less receptive students in the classroom than before, maybe we'll all have to read Thoreau more deliberately and without pre-conceived notions. One of the real lacunas in all the writing about Thoreau in the past decade is the absence of discussions concerned with teaching him. It's time we took stock of what we're doing in that quarter. He no longer teaches himself. You'll remember that he quit teaching when he found out he was going to have to hit his students over the head.

If we're going to preserve his presence in twentieth century American life, I think we're first going to have to insist that he was a nineteenth-century man. He is clearly more than the captain of a huckleberry party, but he is also less than the engineered Captain America of the sixties and early seventies. To put the matter simply, perhaps in the 1980s we might allow Thoreau to be himself. University of North Carolina at Charlotte.



An Unpublished Letter to Russell
by Richard Lebeaux

In more than ten different Journal entries, spanning the years from April 19, 1854 1853 to 1858, Thoreau refers to "Russell" or "R"; it has long been known that Thoreau consulted, corresponded, and met with a John Russell concerning scientific--particularly botanical--matters. Not until quite recently, however, has it been established almost surely just who John Russell was. The identifica-

tion was made in the process of preparing a description of a previously unpublished letter of May 31, 1856 from Thoreau to Russell (the first correspondence yet discovered between these men). The letter, which turned up in a now-dispersed collection from the San Francisco area,¹ and which is currently the property of JOHN HOWELL-BOOKS, was examined by Jeffrey Thomas and Dorothy Sloan of JOHN HOWELL-BOOKS, both of whom sought to identify Russell. After much detective work and after following many leads (including the possibility of a connection with Mary Russell of Plymouth), the search seemed to have reached a dead end. Faced with the frustrating prospect of having no new information on Russell for his description of the letter, Jeffrey Thomas sought solace in Max Meisel's Bibliography of American Natural History: the Pioneer Century, 1769-1865 (Brooklyn: Premier Publishing Company, 1924-1929). To Thomas's surprise and delight, emerging from these pages was the Rev. John Lewis Russell (1808-1873), "listed both as an officer of several botanical associations and as a frequent contributor of botanical essays and notes."² Thomas learned that Russell was a resident of Salem, Mass. and a well-known amateur naturalist who was active in the Essex County Natural History Society, which subsequently became the Essex Institute. One of his several scientific papers which appeared in New England publications was "A Visit to a Locality of the Climbing Fern at Walden Pond" (Boston, Magazine of Horticulture and Botany, March, 1855),³ which apparently was based on a visit to Walden Pond with Thoreau on August 16, 1854.⁴ There is an extensive uncatalogued collection of his manuscripts and correspondence at the Essex Institute, and it is quite possible that, thanks to Thomas's discovery, other Thoreau materials will be unearthed.

Following is Thoreau's letter to Russell, published here for the first time with the kind permission of JOHN HOWELL-BOOKS, Warren R. Howell, prop.:

Concord, May 31st
1856

Mr. Russell

Dear Sir,

I shall be very glad to help you collect the Nymphaeacease &c, and to spend another day with you on our river, & in our fields and woods.

The flowers of the Nymphaea odorata, Nuphar advena & "i.e.", Nuphar Kalmiana are all abundant after the first of July, & last till September; but the leaves, as you know, are soon eaten by insects. The Hydropeplis begins to blossom about the middle of July. The 18th or 20th of that month therefore will be a good time to collect all of these.

I have not noticed Udora canadensis in our waters. I have not looked for it.

As for the Ranunculuses, I have observed R. aquatilis (var fluvialis)----Purshii----Repens--Bulbosus-- & Acris. These I will undertake to show you when you come here, or will deposit, say with Miss Mackay for you (if you so arrange) but such are my engagements that I should not dare engage to press them for you. My sister is now in Worcester. She is in such feeble health, that I am sorry to answer for her that she would not be able to do it, though the plants were collected for her.

I do not foresee but that I shall be at home in July. At any rate, if you will notify me beforehand of your movements, whatever the season, there will be

no danger of disappointment. There are various things I would like to show you & get your opinion about--

Yrs truly

Henry D. Thoreau

NOTES

¹Jeffrey Thomas, letter of May 4, 1979. For the information on John Russell and the Thoreau letter, I am deeply indebted to Jeffrey Thomas's letter and his detailed description for JOHN HOWELL-BOOKS, "A Thoreau Letter on New-England Wildflowers." I am also indebted to Mr. Thomas for his transcription of the letter and to Ed Schofield of The Institute of Ecology, Butler University, for further most important advice in the transcription. Dorothy Sloan's diligent investigations and support have been appreciated as well. Grateful acknowledgement is given to JOHN HOWELL-BOOKS, Warren R. Howell, prop., for permission to publish the letter itself.

²Thomas, letter of May 4, 1979.

³Jeffrey Thomas, "A Thoreau Letter on New-England Wildflowers." Michigan State University.



May 10, 1854

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May 17, 1854

THE 1980 ANNUAL MEETING . . .

This year's annual meeting will be held on Saturday, July 12, 1980, in the First Parish Church in

Concord. Speaker of the day will be Robert D. Richardson, Jr., Professor of English at the University of Denver and author of Myth and Literature in the American Renaissance. (For a review of this book with much about Thoreau, see Bulletin No. 147, pp. 4-5). The president, Dana Greeley, will speak on Thoreau's world-wide influence. The coffee hour begins at 9:00 and the business meeting at 10:00, followed at 10:30 by the addresses. After the luncheon, a Thoreau Quiz will be led by Roland Robbins. A special afternoon even will be an open house at the Thoreau-Alcott House on Main Street, now the residence of Dr. and Mrs. Paul Dinsmore. At 1:45 there will be a panel on "Thoreau and Contemporary Issues." Three alternative programs begin at 3:00: 1) Robert Needham will conduct a walking tour of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery; 2) Marcia Moss will show people the Thoreau treasures in the Concord Library; 3) Thomas Blanding will conduct a walking tour of houses and sites about Concord center associated with the Thoreaus, finishing at the Thoreau-Alcott House. The Thoreau Lyceum will host a sherry party at 5:00. At 8:00 there will be a Thoreau Dramatic Service at the First Parish Church.

At noon a luncheon will be served. Tickets (\$3.75) must be reserved by July 6 through Mrs. Charles MacPherson, 46 Nagog Hill Road, Acton, Mass. 01720.

At 6:00 a box supper will be served at the Thoreau Lyceum. Tickets (\$3.25) must be reserved by July 6 through the Thoreau Lyceum, 156 Belknap Street, Concord, Mass. 01742.

On Friday evening, the 11th, the Thoreau Lyceum will sponsor a lecture at 8:30 by Edward Wagenknecht, author of the forthcoming Henry David Thoreau: What Manner of Man? Through the weekend the Lyceum will exhibit rarely-seen memorabilia of the Thoreaus and their friends, the Sewalls and the Wards.

The Sunday morning (July 13th) Service at the First Parish Church will be led by Reverend Dana Greeley. Walter Harding will deliver the sermon.

For information on nominations for new officers, see Bulletin 150. Additional nominations may be made from the floor. The executive committee may present motions on restructuring the offices of the society and on raising dues.

For those who wish to make hotel or motel reservations for the week-end, there are the Colonial Inn (in the center of town), the Hawthorne Inn (about a mile out on Lexington Road), the Howard Johnson Motel (about 2 miles out on route 2) and the Concordian Motel (about four miles out, in Acton).



May 16, 1854

ANNE ROOT MCGRATH: OUR
NEW PRESIDENT
An autobiography

Like Henry Thoreau, I was born and brought up in Concord and, as it now seems, "in the nick of time, too". My father, George Frederick Root, had come East from Chicago to go to Harvard and stayed on to live in Concord where, for over 50 years, he farmed on what had once been the property of Thoreau's favorite farmer, Edmund Hosmer, on what is now Sandy Pond Road. Father read from Thoreau every day and quoted him so often that, when I was very small, I thought they must have been acquainted. My mother, Olive Gage, was a Concord History buff and an early member of the Thoreau Society. My two great loves were books and music and, after studying choral conducting under G. Wallace Woodworth of Harvard, I was an organist and choir director for 25 years. In

1942 I married Thomas W. McGrath whose family has farmed in Concord since the 1850s. With our two sons we continue the tradition. I have served on the Concord Recreation and the Concord School Committee. For the last 12 years I have been the curator of the Thoreau Lyceum, an interesting and stimulating occupation where there is never enough time to read all there is to read or to write all there is to write. I look forward to the next year with great anticipation.



May 17, 1854

NOTES AND QUERIES

A U.S. Air Force recruiting pamphlet is entitled "Our Life Is Frittered Away by Detail. . . Henry David Thoreau"!

Joseph Jones of the University of Texas asks where Thoreau says something to the effect that one cannot despair within the sound of running water?

Among forthcoming books on Thoreau: Mary Elkins Moller, THOREAU IN THE HUMAN COMMUNITY (Univ. of Mass. Press); Philip Gura, THE WISDOM OF WORDS (Wesleyan Univ. Press); and Walter Harding and Michael Meyer, THE NEW THOREAU HANDBOOK (NYU Press).

Eastern Connecticut State College in Willimantic will again this summer sponsor a field trip course following Thoreau's journeys in the Maine Woods, conducted by Parker Huber.

SUNY: Geneseo and the Thoreau Lyceum will again sponsor three five-day seminars in Concord in July on Thoreau and the Man; Thoreau, Nature and Concord; and Thoreau's Ideas, all conducted by Walter Harding.

Thoreau Society member William Sutton (30 Berkshire Ct., London, Ont. N6J 3N7) has decided to sell his personal collection of approx. 75 volumes by or about Thoreau. For details write him directly.

Back issues of the Thoreau Society Booklets and Bulletins are available only from The Thoreau Lyceum, 156 Belknap St., Concord, Mass. 01742.

Rev. Dr. Alfred Wheeler Stone, perhaps the oldest active Thoreau Society member, died at the age of 92 on Feb. 16, 1980. He had attended our annual meetings regularly up through last summer.

Harvard University Press has just issued Emerson's ESSAYS: FIRST SERIES, edited by Joseph Slater, in its new edition of Emerson's works.

Thoreau Society member Egbert Oliver's autobiography, THE SHAPING OF A FAMILY (Portland, Ore.: HaPi Press, 1979), has innumerable references to his interest in Thoreau.

The Nathaniel Hawthorne Society has scheduled a meeting on Hawthorne's Concord years for October 3-4, 1980, in Concord. Papers are invited on Hawthorne in relation to his Concord neighbors or on the romances he left unfinished at his death. Papers, 20 minutes or less in length, should be addressed by June 1, 1980, to Arlin Turner, English Dept., Southwest Texas State Univ., San Marcos, TX 78666.

The Thoreau Society of Japan held a meeting at Taisho Univ. in Tokyo on Nov. 30, 1979. Hikaru Saito spoke on "On the Dialogue in 'Brute Neighbord"'; Satoru Shimbo on "The Significance of the Light in Thoreau"; and Kenichi Takada on "Thoreau's Quest for Redemption in A WEEK."

Adam York, 340 Poplar St., Hanover, Pa. 17331 is selling a complete tape recording of WALDEN for

\$9.95, but playable only on their players.

When Alfred Kazin was asked by one of his students why Thoreau kept writing when his works weren't being sold, he replied, "The poor sap couldn't think of anything else to do."

A Washington, D.C. boutique is named the Velvet Pumpkin from Thoreau's remark about preferring to sit alone on a pumpkin rather than share a velvet cushion.



A VISIT TO WALDEN
by Robert Levenson

May 27, 1854

I recently had a job in New York City and planned 2 days at the end of this job to go to Concord, Mass., something I have wanted to do for about 7 years.

I wanted to see Walden Pond and other sites, but most of all I wanted to relax and take my time in Concord and the surrounding woods where Thoreau lived his life. I brought the biography, THE DAYS OF HENRY THOREAU by Walter Harding with me and planned to compare the 1906 map of Concord in the book with the map of Concord today, and mark areas I wanted to see. I did not know I would get a very good map for 50¢ which included most historical and literary sites. But even so, the book gave me more insight into these places and the old map showed a few places, such as the Texas house, that the new did not.

I got to Boston about 5 o'clock, rented a car and arrived in Concord about 6:30 pm. Not yet having my bearings and with dark approaching I saw a sign saying "Walden Pond" and drove there for a quick look. To my disappointment there were many people there doing many things other than thinking Thoreauian thoughts. I walked around a little and decided to come back in the morning.

I got a room in Bedford, as the Colonial Inn was full and I could not find another place in town. I didn't get up as early as I had wanted the next morning, and figuring Walden would not be deserted, I decided to go to the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. It is a beautiful cemetery and I felt I was visiting friends-- Henry, his family, the Emersons, Hawthornes, Samuel Hoar, and a few others.

I then drove to Walden Pond. It did not bother me that I was not alone this time, as I was prepared. I carried my rock that I brought from Lake Tahoe, California, to put on the cairn and walked the trail to the house site. Walden Pond is bigger and more beautiful than I had thought. Being at the house site was very special. I threw my rock near the top of the cairn and it made a deep resounding noise of rock against rock which made me feel good. I looked around for the location of the beanfield but could not find it. A few years ago I had decided to climb Fair Haven Hill because of the description given by Thoreau in his Journal (II, 9-10), "In all my rambles I have seen no landscape which can make me forget Fair Haven. I sit on its Cliff in a new spring day, and look over the awakening woods and the river, and hear the new birds sing, with the same delight as ever. It is as sweet a mystery to me as ever, what this world is. Fair Haven Lake in the south, with its pine covered island and its meadows, the hickories putting out fresh young yellowish leaves, and the oakes light grayish ones, while the oven-bird thrums his sawyer-like strain, and the chewink

rustles through the dry leaves or repeats his jinkle on a tree-top, and the wood thrush, the genuine of the wood, whistles for the first time his clear and thrilling strain,-- it sounds as it did the first time I heard it. The sight of these budding woods intoxicates me,-- this diet drink." I set off to find that hill and once I left the house site I was alone. The forest was beautiful, much more soft and delicate than the forests of the west that I was accustomed to. I walked the trails, marking the forks so I could retrace my steps and thinking how well Thoreau knew this forest and that he needed no special markers. I came to the Fitchburg Railroad (now known as the Boston & Maine Railroad) and found an old railroad spike under some discarded old railroad planks along the side of the rail. Then along came a train barreling along very fast making everything around me shake. Thoreau most definitely heard the railroad well when living at Walden Pond. Then crossing the railroad I walked some more trails making my way, I think, toward Fair Haven Hill. The forest was so dense I could not find a lookout to see where I was. I had no detailed map or compass and so after a few hours of strolling the woods I turned back satisfied that I had roamed the forest Thoreau knew and loved so well.

I then drove back to Concord. I walked the streets seeing the jail site, the Main Street house, making my way to the Thoreau Lyceum. There I spent a few hours - looking at various artifacts, old books, new books, the replica of his Walden house, got a private tour, sat on his family couch, not only saw his desk that he wrote Walden on but actually opened drawers. While talking with my tour guide, I saw a picture of the cairn before it was moved and I mentioned to her that I had thrown a rock on the pile that morning. She asked me if I had signed the rock and I said, "No, Henry wouldn't have done that." She agreed but said many people had, including Walt Whitman. Well I thought if Walt Whitman did it then I would too, and I decided to write my name when I went to the pond the next morning. I bought a few books and retired to my motel room to wallow in the day just spent.

The next morning I got up very early so as to be at the house site by myself. I got to Walden Pond before 7 a.m. and although there was one car, I saw no one. Being at the house site was really special. I was there alone for about 1½ hours. My only disappointment was at the cairn. My rock was gone! I looked all over, the spot where it landed when I threw it, and everywhere else. It was gone. Apparently someone decided to take home a souvenir and got my rock. Little did they know the rock had been there less than 24 hours. I walked the forest again and when I left Walden Pond I felt I knew it well.

I then drove to the Emerson house and took the tour. I had remembered to look for the dining room chair with the drawer Thoreau built under it for Mrs. Emerson, and it was there. The tour was very interesting. The house is still owned by the Emerson family and the house and the furniture is as it was when R.W. Emerson lived there, right down to his hat hanging in the entry way. When the tour was over I asked if I could get a closer look at the chair drawer Thoreau built. It was a fine drawer, built well with dovetail joints and it worked very smoothly.

From the Emerson house I drove leisurely to Boston, having enjoyed my 2 days in Concord very much.



AN EARLY SKETCH OF THE WALDEN CAIRN. This, perhaps the earliest sketch of the cairn, is in the Concord Free Public Library. It is dated "Aug. 4, 1873" but it is not signed.